



Vandals at the Gates of Medicine—Historic Perspectives on the Battle over Health Care Reform, by Miguel A. Faria, Jr., MD. Macon, Georgia: Hacienda Publishing Co., 1995.

The central tenet of Miguel A. Faria's *Vandals at the Gates of Medicine* is that "medicine, like ancient Rome, is seemingly at the brink of being dismantled, besieged by modern barbarians amassing at her gates." Who are these "barbarians"? In a strained comparison, Faria maintains that government "over-centralization, corruption, burgeoning bureaucracy, and rampant authoritarianism" as well as "welfarism, and the predictable mass migration to the cities of . . . laborers in search of government subsidies and entitlements, rather than land to be tilled and work to be performed" were responsible first for the fall of Rome and now for the "mortal danger" of both the US health care delivery system and the "American republic." As a side note, government intervention is also reported to be responsible for escalating health-care costs. The solution, according to Faria, is reintroduction of "truly free-market" medical care.

Dr. Faria begins his exposition with a discussion of antiquity, the origins of civilization, and the birth of medicine. His explication of ancient history is impressive if somewhat eclectic (there are sections on Zoroastrianism and Egyptian mythology here). In the end, however, his history almost completely neglects modernity as well as the 18th and 19th centuries. This is a serious omission, especially given that Faria states, "It was not until the turn of the 20th Century that a patient seeking the professional help of an ordinary physician actually benefited from that visit," and that we currently benefit from "the complex scientific medicine of today's technologic society." Similarly, Faria devotes only three pages of anecdote to international comparisons of current health care systems. It is annoying and disappointing that Faria interrupts his erudite history with impassioned rhetoric that is unsupported by any factual documentation: "the President's proposal for health

care reform . . . if implemented would dictate how doctors will practice medicine in the US,” and “in my opinion, she [Donna Shalala] is certainly not sagacious in health care issues. . .” Where is the substance and careful thinking that will validate these assertions?

Never mind the widely recognized collection of economic factors that make health care markets different than other areas of the economy: uncertainty (emphasized by Kenneth J. Arrow, Nobel prize winning economist), asymmetric knowledge, and externalities. Never mind that some believe these factors not only justify but mandate government intervention in health care. Never mind that the role of the United States government in the health sector is much less than in almost all other countries, or that countries as diverse as Canada, Japan, Germany, and Great Britain have universal health insurance. Faria ignores the reality that powerful corporations (a result of the market forces he advocates) are in the process of restructuring health care in ways that may compromise patient care. He fails to discuss what health care was like in the United States before Medicare and Medicaid, nor does he seem to recognize that in the majority of families without health care insurance at least one parent is employed. Although his historical narrative, especially the medical dissertation, is captivating, Dr. Faria’s central argument is (to borrow one of his favorite words) indigestible “pabulum.”

In addition to his history, Faria’s account of his native Cuba is worthwhile. The most important contribution of his book, however, is his admonition that physicians must become involved in health care discussions and the reform of the health care system: we must be politically active for the sake of our patients and ourselves. Although I believe that Dr. Faria’s passion is largely misguided, his vehement plea for physicians to educate themselves and act is well received. Kudos to him for his participation. As he duly notes, Dante’s “hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.”

JEFFREY M. KACZOROWSKI, MD
FELLOW, GENERAL PEDIATRICS
UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER